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ABSTRACT

The discussion in this paper is based on three conclusions drawn from a professional lifetime in the media: that limited to a choice from among information, persuasion, or entertainment, the purpose of the mass media is entertainment; that given a choice between technology and content, technology such as cable TV predominates; and that faced with the choice between personality (the provider of the content) and the message (the content), the personality invariably wins out. The focus of the paper is on the first and third conclusions, and numerous examples are drawn from printed, broadcast, filmed, and videotaped media, with television programming emphasized. Suggestions are offered to counteract the lack of meaningful content in commercial television, the primary one being to refuse to view it. (AEA)

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Mass Media and the Ego-Centric Predicament/
The Trivialization of Information

A Paper

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Preamble

It seems that no topic has received as much attention in recent years as have the mass media. Their ubiquitous nature, particularly television, has given rise to much criticism of their content and its effects. This may be appropriate particularly if one believes that

the means of communication, in any case, deeply influence the spiritual life of man, the quality of his choices and appreciations, the going standards of valuation, and the character of democratic action in politics. Mass communications, over a long period of time, may prove to have more influence on the spirit of man than the improvement of social and economic standards of production and consumption. This power is due to its all-pervasive character, bathing the mind and emotions in a continuous sea of images, sounds, signs, and meanings, but its methods are controlled increasingly by bigness and centralization which characterize so much of our practical and economic existence.

The national interest in the media is evidenced in the veritable avalanche of books, articles, etc., discussing a variety of contexts including: Society, Culture, Criticism, Effects, Influence, Analysis, Responsibility, and Theory, to name just a few. No other area of human involvement has received as much criticism and much of it pejorative.

Perspective

From a professional lifetime of study and participation in the media, we may posit the following three conclusions:

1. If limited to one choice from among (a) information, (b) persuasion and (c) entertainment, as the general end or purpose of the mass media - from any perspective - it must be entertainment, irrespective of what example or mode is suggested. Be it hard news, advertising or general information, it is presented in a format of entertainment.
2. If given a choice between technology and content, technology - the new advances in the state of the art - predominates. The fascination of equipment and the infatuation with speed are all too often at the expense of what is looked at and reported. The heightened pace and indiscriminant use of technology leave little time for critical review of what is covered. The end result

would be one thing if it were technically proficient though lacking in substance but to have it be technically inferior as well compounds the felony. Axiom - something not worth doing is not worth doing well, i.e., technology stifles substance. One would hope that this new technology, including whole systems such as Cable TV, which promises the lure of diversity, would discover, define and refine subject matter at a greater rate than that which produces and perfects these tools of the media.

3. When faced with the choice between personality - the sender of the message - and the message - the persona invariably wins over content. Ordinarily, this is a sine qua non in communication situations but in the mass media the concept is extended and produces the ego-centric predicament. When the audience is confronted with what Daniel Boorstin once described as a person who is "well known for his well-knownness",² the result, more often than not, produces "noise", a serious interference with communication. As in other contexts, what persons of that ilk represent speaks so loudly, you cannot hear what they are saying. They are found to be me-deep in conversation, be it a news program or interview situation.

As to the first conclusion - Entertainment - one need only read, look or listen to print/broadcast/filmed-video taped fare and the point is made. Media demand attention and will do almost anything to attract audiences - catch might be a better word. Message content (if there is any) is made "striking"; we have news in a format labeled "Happy Talk," "Eyewitness News" (Eyewitless?); expanded use of illustrations (including University text materials!); etc., all calculated to grasp attention - that same attention which many feel is on the decline. The crucial point is that this entertainment is most often at the expense of knowledge which media should be providing the public - information needed and vital for the simple matter of coping in the world. Edward R. Murrow, the late CBS broadcaster, argued that "what you don't know can hurt you." Joseph Wood Krutch puts it this way:

what so many enthusiasts of communication will not realize is that there is a point beyond which everything should not be made varied, vivid, picturesque, dramatic and "interesting". A time is sure to come when something which needs very much to be learned cannot possibly be made as vivid, picturesque, dramatic, and interesting as certain other things. And when that time comes, only the individual who can turn his attention to what is most interesting, is capable of being educated.³

As to technological advances, again, the reader need only look around. Americans seem to be fascinated with technology, the gadgets which govern their lives. The mass media reflect this philosophy but since our emphasis in this paper is message content we will leave this important area with the hope that the media barons show more concern with what that technology produces - what is put into that video display terminal, what the camera is aimed at, what is recorded, etc.

As to personality, again, the reader can take note of the postures reflected in the media and conclude accordingly. Eric Sevareid, the retired CBS broadcaster said "You've got to resist acting like your own public image."⁴ A preview of "Prime Time Sunday," the new NBC "magazine", quotes the host Tom Snyder saying, "Content aside, isn't it personalities who make successful TV shows, news, and entertainment?"⁵ Being one of the premier megalomaniacs in the business, one might hope that, for his sake, he is right - but, on the other hand - . A review of that program makes the point more succinctly. "Snyder is essentially a fast-on-his-feet showman with pizzazz in his veins. That, not his journalism is what's on display."⁶ Again, the form vs. content argument is manifested - or the blending of chutzpah and charisma in an otherwise bland mixture.

President Carter was criticized for his speech of July 17, 1979 for displaying more "show" than "tell." The information was not new (a rerun?) but the form was. That form called attention to itself questioning the genuineness of the presenter as well as the information.

The reader teams on our news programs vie for attention, the interplay, more often than not, more visible than the information disseminated (decimated?). The co-hosts on interview programs reflect the same "cloying for the audience's attention" posture, which, if they are successful, make them more well-known for what they are than what they say e.g., Phil Donahue of the "Donahue Show" is labeled a "media hero."⁷ The same is true of Johnny Carson where the personification of form is at the expense of content. It may well be an outgrowth of what Tom Wolfe called "The 'Me' Decade," which talks of the great awakening of the seventies, "a weird combination of piety and encounter groups, of raging ego-massage...."⁸

Another disturbing quality of the "rage" is the trumpeting pronouncements emanating from these "front and center" egos on subjects outside their

ken. The notoriety provides the platform and spotlight - too bad that something did not fill the intelligence gap. A New England saying is certainly appropriate for these situations if not most, to the effect that you do not say anything unless it improves on silence.

The examples are infinite and will be the subject of another paper since the topic certainly deserves more in-depth analysis. The major focus here is, as has been stated, message content and what the media, particularly television, appear to be doing to/about information, to which we now turn our attention.

Introduction

In a 1965 New Yorker magazine cartoon showing two people viewing television, the man says, "When you consider television's power to educate aren't you thankful it doesn't? The paradox is at once true and alarming. Yes, what comes over this "boob tube" or "chewing gum for eyes" or whatever negative term we use to rationalize, in a reverse sense, our addiction to its fare, this Polyphemus eye does have a decided impact. What that impact is has been the stuff most of the articles written about the medium since its inception.

A Probe

This part of the paper is to be viewed more as a probe rather than a statement providing some definitive solution to the concern or to the problem of television's mediocre and inferior messages. Assuming the cartoon's implication to be true, the essential comment here is -- If we are concerned about the affects/effects of, say, the portrayal of violence, questionable allusions to sex, mores, morals, in that they may produce imitative behavior or that people tend to believe the "truth" in advertising, why is not the opposite true of having people imitate images of themselves when they are of superior value? Would not it follow that bringing mass audiences in direct relationship with virtuous values and attitudes by and with which they can cope in a real sense make them better people? Robert Lewis Shayon puts it more succinctly when he refers to the content of contemporary TV against which the critic inveighs. "Stop!" the critic says "to the people of television and to their vast audiences; not from

using and enjoying this remarkable medium of human communication, but from using it badly, immorally, for inferior purposes."⁹

So, we do not propose throwing the baby out with the bath water. Simply recommended, along with countless other voices is a tad more quality. But, we are told, the audience determines the end and purpose of communication. Consequently, what most people want, all people get. But, then too, Horace Greeley is supposed to have said, "The masses aren't asses!" If given a choice, we would have to side with H. L. Mencken, who was fond of referring to the "booboisie" or the "American libido for the ugly" and observed that no one ever went broke underestimating the American intelligence. If this is true, we appear to deserve what we get (while at the same time saying that, of course, we deserve the best); for it is axiomatic -- if it were not successful, it would not be on. Granted the "Gong Show", "Dating Game", or the "\$1.98 Beauty Show", and the like, are not the only programs on TV. Critics agree that a percentage of American television is superior, but that percentage is far too small. And, if G. B. Shaw's thought is correct to the effect that if you give people something often enough they soon begin to want what you give them, then the present disproportionate ratio will have us continue to wallow in mediocrity. The following "quote of the month" may provide a reason for this or should it be a warning?

I'm very fond of stupidity. I think it's probably the most important and least understood aspect of American life. American society...has a concept of coolness and cuteness...both are factors of stupidity...it's not getting any smarter out there...You have to come to terms with stupidity...and make it work for you.¹⁰

Daniel J. Boorstin has referred to broadcasting as

perhaps the most potent everyday witness to the converging powers of technology. The most democratic of all forms of public communication, broadcasting converges people, drawing them into the same experiences in ways never before possible. The great levelers, broadcast messages and images, go without discrimination to the homes of rich and poor, white and black, young and old. More than 99% of American households have at least one television set. If you own a set, no admission fee is required to enter TV land and to have a front seat at all its marvels. No questions are asked, no skill is needed. You need not even sit still or keep quiet. To enjoy what TV brings, the illiterate are just as well qualified as the educated -- some would say even better qualified. Our Age of

Broadcasting is a fitting climax, then, to the history of a nation whose birth certificate proclaimed that 'all men are created equal' and which has aimed to bring everything to everybody.¹¹

Others have referred to the possibility of people "participating" in all of the lives around them through the miracle of TV. But the issue here is that the participation is uncommitted. And not until the confusion between fact and fantasy is addressed and not until being as opposed to becoming is the principle will the mission of this new communication medium have fulfilled one of its main purposes - information. The prime purpose at the moment is entertainment and if we view it in that light and fail to see TV as a new medium, a new technology demanding different responses, we will continue to evaluate it as we do print. For instance, many fail to see that movies made after the advent of TV used techniques to which TV viewers had become accustomed, i.e., the old media use techniques of the new while at the same time not crediting the new medium. It calls for the discovery of new laws, new relationships, new insights, to use Shayon's terms.

Family TV viewing still absorbs approximately 6 hours a day -- 25% of a day! Recent surveys indicate a dropping off, but it is measured only in minutes. This is all the more alarming if you believe that the course of a particular culture may be determined more decisively by what people do during their leisure time as opposed to what is produced during working hours. How this leisure time is spent will determine whether we will have parks or expanded asphalt jungles, libraries, new books, vs. wall-sized TV screens, etc., etc., etc. If Marshall McLuhan is correct in his TV tribal village concept where one would be brought together with fellow men, what would they say to one another? What is presently seen on TV will not be of much help. They will not know questions to ask, much less the answers.

Seeking the Electronic Valhalla

The problem with communication is the illusion that it takes place. Whether it does or not depends on the responsibility -- 200% responsibility -- represented by the interaction of the parties. Until then it will be incumbent on viewers to be more than casually selective -- they must be actively critical. This is particularly true of parents and teachers who

provide guidance for younger minds as they prouette through the channels, seeking the electronic Valhalla. There is none! But with careful analysis, what is valuable, what has virtue may be consciously seen and not only accidentally spotted from the plethora of images which come cascading from these audio-visual cornucopia. Referring to Murrow's earlier quote, what is on TV may not hurt young minds, but it does certainly have a stuilifying effect. With assiduous analysis and guidance all does not have to be viewed as escapist fare. The "eyewitless" news can be separated from what is meaningful, the explosions of guns from the explosions of ideas, and a sense of grace and the aesthetic from the brutal which dehumanizes and alienates. While the hue and cry continue over public and educational TV, educators must grasp every opportunity to set the TV record straight. We have long agitated for a media analysis segment in lesson plans, particularly at the elementary level, since prior to entering that schooling children have been exposed to more hours of TV than the total hours of instruction in their future academic lives. This media exposure changes the way human beings arrive at meanings by simultaneously affecting the ratio among the senses. We need to study this phenomenon in order to develop literacy in all media.

Probing Further

I stated earlier what this was not to be. Let me now push the probe in a bit further. Since much of what is presently on TV is viewed with a jaundiced eye we should open the other eye to seek out the worthwhile and eschew the trivial and meretricious. But doing that is not enough. The other shoe must be dropped and that is simply declared audience response. There is no "if" about it -- the airwaves do belong to the public and if you choose not to respond to the broadcaster or advertiser with your reaction -- then turn the bloody thing off. That could be the click "heard 'round the world."

There is a quatrain from the Colonial period in America which may be indicative of our present dilemma.

The law locks up the man or woman
Who steals the goose from off the common
But lets the greater felon loose
Who steals the common from the goose

The analog today is that the common (significant information, quality

programming, etc.) is being "stolen" and the silly geese (public) stand around and applaud the theft.

We can still avoid "the ultimate future terror: a nation of videots"¹² and the blurring of fact and fantasy. We may not be able to end the era of conceptualized schlock but we can say "stop!", as Shayon suggested. If we had listened to an earlier critic we may have been able to avoid the whole mess. Twenty-five hundred years ago another "viewer" had a metaphor of life - Socrates - who may well have been the first "television" critic. The reader may recall the myth of the cave where the only "reality" for prisoners chained within a cave from childhood was the shadows of people walking by the opening reflected by a fire on a wall.¹³ Once freed, would they view reality as shadows? The cave dwellers were happy in their ignorance which they did not recognize to be ignorance and in their prejudices which they did not know to be prejudices. What of today's media dwellers?

Information is necessary. Good entertainment is rewarding when reflecting believable images of mankind. Television "cannot be uninvented", in Boorstin's words. And the team of technologists (broadcasters, in this case) and advertisers working together "create progress by developing the need for the unnecessary." Whether or not you believe this dire thought -- one thing is for sure -- we should see to it that we get our money's worth. There needs to be more of an interface between media systems of communication and their publics.

There can be a mediating influence of the alternatives which face the sender of the message. These persons may be viewed as media brokers with two goals: 1, to serve the public and 2, to make a profit. When the two are in conflict, the profit motive wins out. "In the frantic race to hustle the mass audience out of still another buck, the instinct for the vulgar and the contemptible seems boundless"¹⁴ This was said in connection with a comment made about "Bedroom Stories" a new NBC (already cancelled!) "adult" program which represented a new nadir for TV. This is yet another example of what may be a success in one area is excess in another.

Newton Minow, in his "Vast Wasteland" speech to the National Association of Broadcasters in 1961 said that you do not define the public interest as merely what interests the public, the moral implications and obligations are greater.

Hope

Boorstin concludes his essay, which we borrow to conclude ours, by asking "Can we be exhilarated by the momentum that carries us willy-nilly beyond our imaginings and yet have some sense of control over our own destiny?"¹⁵ The answer is a resounding YES! It may not be too late even though recent decisions cast a shadow over the cultural/literacy quotient of future commercial television. The three commercial networks have made a renewed commitment to mass-appeal programming leaving the bulk, if not all, of the cultural programs to the Public Broadcasting Service. They felt that cultural programming is aimed at minorities too small to be serviced by commercial networks with PBS being the place for these "esoteric" events (one shudders to think, considering the yearning for mass appeal, can PBS be far behind with a show titled "Laverne and Shelly?"¹⁶ This mass appeal concept appears to be in spite of the recent suggestion made by one of the more powerful figures in broadcasting, William S. Paley, the founder and board chairman of the Columbia Broadcasting System. He recommended that ABC, CBS and NBC each set aside two hours of primetime a week for "special high quality programs." Even though the executive committee of the Caucus of Producers, Writers and Directors endorsed the proposal, their calling on ABC and NBC to support Paley's plan -- an updated version of one he made a decade ago -- was received coolly. In fact, it is now questionable if CBS itself is interested. But hope springs, etc., etc. That hope is taken from the closing thought which is flashed on the screen at the end of the 1967, NBC film, This Is Marshall McLuhan: The Medium Is the Message. "There is absolutely no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to think." Let us prepare and be ready for Alvin Toffler's Future Shock but not with future schlock.

Footnotes

¹Walter G. Muellder, "Ethical Frontiers," In F. Ernest Johnson, ed., Patterns of Ethics In America Today, (New York, Collier Books, 1962), pp. 172-73.

²Everette E. Dennis, The Media Society, (Dubuque, Iowa, Wm. C. Brown Co., 1978), p. 94.

³Joseph W. Krutch, "What We Say," The American Scholar, Summer, 1955.

⁴Nan Robertson, "Eric Sevaried - 'Inside I Am All Mush'," San Francisco Chronicle, June 2, 1979, p. 11.

⁵Arthur Unger, "Tom Snyder, TV's Prime Time Host," The Christian Science Monitor, June 22, 1979, p. 19.

⁶"Journalism," Broadcasting, July 2, 1979, p. 71.

⁷Marc Fisher, "Donahue, the Media Hero with Controversial Topics," Datebook, San Francisco Examiner & Chronicle, May 27, 1979, p. 50.

⁸Tom Wolfe, "The 'Me' Decade," New York, August 23, 1976, p. 26.

⁹Robert Lewis Shayon, "Consumers, Commercials, and Men About Town," In Horace Newcomb, ed., Television: The Critical View, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 182.

¹⁰Frank Zappa, "Fast Tracks," Playboy, August, 1979. p. 36.

¹¹Daniel J. Boorstin, "Tomorrow: The Republic of Technology," Time, January 17, 1977, pp. 36,37.

¹²Daniel Sohn Interviews Jerzy Kosinski, "A Nation of Videots," In Horace Newcomb, ed., Television: The Critical View, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 345.

¹³B. Jowett, trans., "The Republic - Book VII," The Works of Plato, (New York, The Dial Press 1937), p. 265.

¹⁴John J. O'Connor, "'Bedtime Stories' - Naked Confessions From the Pillow," Datebook, San Francisco Examiner & Chronicle, July 22, 1979, p. 38.

¹⁵Daniel J. Boorstin, Ibid., p. 38.

¹⁶Arthur Unger, "Cultural Programming: Whose Responsibility?," The Christian Science Monitor, July 5, 1979, p. 11.